

## From voyage to discovery: The Iberian legacy in America

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The United States was founded on principles of liberty, law and the rights of man. History gave us the role of embodying, providing and defending freedom among, and for other nations. As the Manifest Destiny unfolded, the nation annexed the distinct Spanish and Mexican heritage in the Southwest different from the North and South. This was the birth of Hispanic heritage born from ideas formed in 1492.

Just 509 years ago Cristoforo Colombo Fontanarrosa, better known as Christopher Columbus, set forth on a voyage seeking a faster route to the East Indies in search of Spanish dominance of a rich trade market. Spain was in a victorious mood that year following the liberation of the Iberian Peninsula from the Muslim Moors who had occupied it since the year 711 A.D. in what is known as Spain's "Reconquest" period.

King Ferdinand and Queen Isabelle – having won a unified kingdom under one religion – accepted the mariners' claims that economic opportunity awaited Spain. The Queen offered Columbus various prisoners as sailors, economic assistance and the famed Nina, Pinta and Santa Maria fleet. The rest is history.

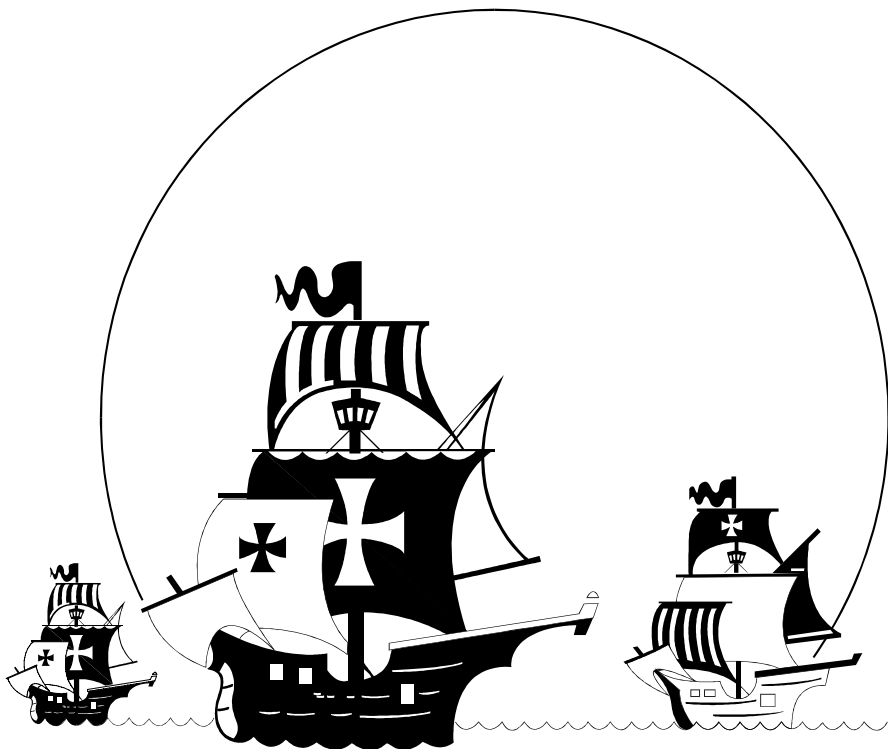
After months lost at sea and near mutiny by frightened sailors, the cry of "Tierra" from the observation mast began a new period in western civilization. He would return to Spain with spices, gold and native islanders as proof of his accomplishments. The "Admiral of the Ocean Seas" would die thinking he reached Southeast Asia when in fact he reached a continent whose birth, nations, language, and culture owe their existence to him.

Latin America extended at one time into California north toward Nevada, Utah, Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado, Texas and Florida. The small towns with distinguished Spanish plazas and a Cathedral are found from those places south into Argentina. These plazas and the Spanish language are the common traits of the Americas. The one exception being Portuguese-speaking Brazil colonized by Portugal, which shares the Iberian Peninsula with Spain.

As the Dutch, English and French followed the Iberians in colonization, the western hemisphere began to take new shapes and languages divided between north and south. England established the 13 colonies in the north while Madrid ruled most of the southern hemisphere. As the United States was born following secession from Britain, Spain's colonies came to crumble from their hands. Independence movements from native-born citizens of Spanish,

Indian and African ancestry began to flourish.

Venezuelan Simon Bolivar's idea of "Great Colombia" – a united nation from Colombia to Argentina – never prospered, and the "Central American States" dream of Honduran Francisco Morazan suffered the same fate. Latin America would be destined to be composed of smaller independent states.



The year 1898 opened a new chapter in the history of the region. By then, the fallen Spanish Empire only held the two colonies of Cuba and Puerto Rico in the Americas. It was to face a young and energetic adversary in the United States of America. The explosion of the USS Maine in Havana harbor in Cuba resulted in American nationalism under the banner "Remember the Maine," and pressure increased on President William McKinley to declare war on Spain to rid the last European power in the hemisphere.

The "Splendid Little War" was defined as Spain's wooden sailing Armada – void of its past glory – facing the steel and steam ships of the United States Navy with an army determined to victory. In defeat, they ceded Cuba, Puerto Rico and the Philippines in the Pacific. The Spanish-American War launched the United States into a global era.

Puerto Ricans were granted American citizenship in 1917 and were free to migrate within the Republic. They largely settled in New York and the Northeast. In 1952 the island was granted commonwealth status – a Free Associated State status. Today, 49 percent favor continuing commonwealth status, 48 percent favor U.S. statehood, and 3 percent favor independence.

Cuba, on the other hand, was granted independence shortly after 1898 and took a different path of political turmoil leading to the 1959 revolution of Fidel Castro. He would bring our nation and the Soviet Union to the brink of nuclear war in 1962, and create foreign policy challenges by supporting communist revolutions, most notably in Central America, Chile and Grenada.

Congresswoman Lileana Ross-Liethen, music industry magnate Emilio Estefan, and the booming economy and Latin flavor that define south Florida today.

There are still several challenges many immigrants have overcome but their lands still face, desperate poverty being chief among them. Colombia today emerges as a new challenge. The government of President Andres Pastrana established "Plan Colombia" in response to the current domestic challenges of his country. Pastrana obtained the commitment from the United States for foreign aid and diplomatic assistance to his plan.

The fact Latin America looks to the United States as a beacon for freedom is a source of priceless trust. I remember walking into a home at a Honduran village in 1998 and seeing John and Robert Kennedy's pictures displayed in the modest living room. As long as millions of our fellow citizens are divided between sharp lines of rich and poor, the cause of peace and prosperity envisioned by President Kennedy in the Alliance for Progress continues. It was that vision that still inspires many of the poorest there today.

President Bush today is committed to strengthening our ties with Latin America. His words that "the United States has no more important relationship in the world than our relationship with Mexico" are momentous. They signify our nation's renewal of a special relationship with our neighbors and sharing of values as similar to our own.

The journey begun by Columbus formed the Americas we share today. The challenges of our time are defined by what future we provide coming generations. In the final analysis, it will be tested by how successful we are in making life better for all of us, in this region, as in the rest of the world.



A portrait of Christopher Columbus

**"We shall find a faster route to the Indies in the name of the Royal Spanish Crown and the Church"**

**– Christopher Columbus, 1492**